

SITTING AND ZEN

The eminent Sixth Ancestor of the Ch'an sect, Hui-Neng, once made a very succinct observation. He said, "The arising of no thoughts with respect to externals is 'sitting.' Calmly observing Original Nature is 'Zen.'" Exactly!

Of course, "Zen is sitting, sitting is Zen" just as surely as "Form is Emptiness, Emptiness is Form," but Hui-Neng's comment gets right to the heart of the dynamic process of Zen. Let's first look at the "sitting" side of this teaching.

When we begin our Zen journey we utilize a variety of practices and teachings whose object is to instruct us in the art of non-attachment. Remember that we have self-conditioned ourselves through lifetimes of habit to attach to whatever so-called "externals" make their way through the gates of our six senses. Since we haven't yet actualized the truth of interrelatedness, we become very distracted by these externals; we catalogue them, analyze them, dance with them, even love them! Externals become our co-player in a long-term, dualistic game of mental ping-pong which only serves to reinforce the sense of a discrete "self."

Non-attachment is simply learning how to let go of externals, and it is a long, frustrating process, a process in which we need to become competent if we are to penetrate deeply into the heart of the matter. The practice of non-attachment is analogous to the first six Ox-Herding Pictures, the famous series of Chinese drawings depicting the Zen journey. The first six of these ten pictures show the process of developing non-attachment by presenting the story of a man looking for an ox. The man knows there's an ox around somewhere. He then spots the ox's tracks and follows them to the ox, after which he captures it, tames it and ends up riding it.

The ox refers to our limited mind, the mind which follows externals here, there and everywhere just as a wild ox roams the countryside. By practicing non-attachment we get our roaming mind under a modicum of control so that we may begin the real work of Zen. But we're still in Hui-Neng's realm of "sitting." We're not ready for true "Zen" yet.

Once we have established a firm practice of non-attachment through meditative concentration, the stage is set for us to experience "samadhi," a state of laser-like concentration in which there is neither subject nor object; no "seer" and nothing being seen, no "hearer" and nothing being

“heard,” and so on. The next two Ox-Herding Pictures refer to this kind of no-subject/no object concentration. They are entitled, “The Ox Forgotten, the Self Alone” and “Both Ox and Self are Forgotten.” When we are practicing non-attachment consistently (“Riding the Ox”), the energy of our concentration rises dramatically. Distinctions between “self” and “other” begin to dissolve. Whatever comes through any of the six sense gates simply does so without comment; the “ox” is now “forgotten.” Our sense of a discrete self just fades away; both the “self” and the “ox” no longer exist as entities. All that remains is awareness, and now that we have mastered our “sitting,” we are ready for true Zen.

Please recall Hui-Neng’s definition of Zen: calmly observing Original Nature. At this point “calmness” is a given since the mind is no longer flitting from place to place like a hummingbird among the flowers. “Observing” is also a given because all that exists is awareness; not awareness of this or awareness of that, just awareness itself. The ninth Ox-Herding Picture calls this “Returning to the Source,” but to be precise, nobody’s really “returning” anywhere; Original Nature is simply manifest without interruption of any kind.

Many commentators have referred to this with the term “Pointing to True Mind,” but since there’s no “pointer” and nothing at which to “point,” we can say that everything is actually pointing to everything else! There’s no “source” to which to “return” because we’ve never really “left.” Everything simply is as it is, awareness is simply awareness, mind is simply mind, all phenomena are now bereft of a discrete, separate identity.

Now we may get about the business of living in the world, living completely and thoroughly, doing whatever is appropriate in any circumstance, maximizing compassion and wisdom while minimizing pain and suffering. This is Zen too. The tenth Ox-Herding Picture, “Returning to the Marketplace With Helping Hands,” illustrates this kind of life, a life which is truly spontaneous because it is one with all conditions and situations.

The Chinese referred to this meditative discipline as “Tso-Ch’an,” which literally means, “sitting meditation.” The Japanese way of saying “Tso-Ch’an” is “Zazen,” which is a term most of us know. We must remember to try not to separate “sitting” from “Zen” even though our own personal journey may involve mastering one before realizing the other. This is why even the most awakened masters and practitioners of Zen constantly maintain their practice/ observation, both on and off the cushion, bench or chair.

We still have much in the way of habit-mind to overcome, so as Master Hui-Neng said, let no thoughts arise with respect to so-called “externals” and simply, calmly, observe Original Nature. This is both sitting *and* Zen...this is Zen itself.